

Conference Paper

Religions in Fictional Worlds: Infernal Religious Mythology in Fantasy Series

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Abstract

This article discusses the reasons behind the popularity of infernal heroes in the context of "religions in fictional worlds". Are there any common guidelines for creating fantasy narratives? This refers to the "monads", that are infernal cultural heroes, and the origins of their popularity in teenage series. Modern infernal heroes are generally not negative, foul or repulsive. On the contrary, as the result of inversion, as one of the methods of religious mythology, they became attractive role models for many admirers and movie fans, as well as readers of novels, on which these movies are based. Can we call religious fantasy modern fairytales for adults? Do infernal heroes start young people thinking about the bottom line of their life? Why are these characters so appealing to women – perhaps, they are the new gender myths? The author of this article tackles these and many other important issues through hermeneutic analysis of S. Meyer's "Twilight" and "The Vampire Diaries" by L. J. Smith.

Keywords: myth, religion, religions of fictional worlds, religious mythology, fairy tale, faith, youth subculture, cultural hero, mythological meaning-making.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary religious mythology features a variety of cultural heroes. Postmodern fantasy movies and literature pay much attention to infernal heroes: vampires, witches, werewolves, "twilight hunters", zombies, warlocks, etc. Contemporary myth-making in the sphere of popular culture offers a wide range of role models – "new heroes". The meaning of culture heroes as "bearers of cultural goods" has shifted to veneration of idols and the means of identification with them in one's own real-life experience. Cultural heroes take on new semantic aspects, turning into instruments of social control and crowd manipulation. This function reflects the essential needs for ideals in contemporary mythological meaning-making. Contemporary "positive" mythical hero creates a certain conceptual framework of human values. So why the

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image of infernal mythical hero in the XXI century mass culture is given preference over a “superhero”, defender of the good?

Modern infernal heroes are generally not negative, foul or repulsive. On the contrary, as the result of inversion, as one of the methods of religious mythology, they became attractive role models for many admirers and movie fans, as well as readers of novels, on which these movies are based ([5], p. 197–198). Bipolar attitude towards cultural heroes is also expressed in many books on “vampirology”, “vampiromania”, “lycanophobia” and “lycanomania”. Over the past years, there appeared a new term, “fiction-religions”, as a definition for certain roleplaying computer games based on either traditional or emergent mythological motives and elaborated by artistic devices, such as literature, graphic arts, and cinema.

1.1. Methods

It stands to mention that the analysis of meanings and artistic mythopoeia in the fictional religions is the subject of many discussions, emphasizing the importance of viewing the reason for human existence through philosophical, theological and anthropological concepts. For example, Irvin William’s and Jacoby Henry’s “Game of Thrones and Philosophy” stresses that “the work of G. Martin should be researched... through the analysis of human personalities in the turbulent times” (Irvin and Jacoby 2015, p. 11). Baggett D. and Klein S. E. in their “Harry Potter and Philosophy” note that J.K Rowling’s universe has begun to attract the attention of literary scholars and academics. At the 2003 conference in Orlando, Florida, and the 2004 conference in Canada, they discussed the important issues of magic and personality development (Baggett and Klein 2005, p. 11). “The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy” also deals with philosophical issues: “how to tell truth from illusion? Does might make right? Are there any fundamental moral standards for everyone?” (The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy 2011, p. 9). The author of this article has already addressed the problems of infernality and proven that postmodern infernal heroes are worthy of special attention and analysis, helping young people to gain a fuller understanding of the world and establishing moral foundations.

Let us address the reasons for this peculiarity. In our opinion, the first is secular culture. In society, there are both people who do and do not believe in the existence of supernatural beings. Heroes are given the opportunity to live their own lives “among people” and try to coexist in harmony; heroes do not discuss religious topics like salvation or what awaits them after they have been killed, which is rather

hard, however possible. Another reason is feminization. The evolution of women's rights and freedoms allows them to express their feelings more openly, to search and fight for love, even if the beloved is not like all the others. The next reason is the disenchantment of the world. This is why an infernal hero might well be a person next door. Nobody longer believes in fairytales and mythical creatures. Yet another reason is popular culture, which is based on the "hierarchy of needs thesaurus". Infernal religious mythology offers solutions to all thesaurus problems, which makes its characters appealing to viewers and readers, as well as author analysis. It is emphasized that instead of the holy icons popular culture shapes secular ones, which leads to the veneration of imagery created by an artist, superhero, or both. L.J. Smith understands very well the appetites of her readers: beautiful heroes (whether human or not), a bitter conflict between good and evil, and in the middle of it – a young protagonist struggling for their soul and searching for their true selves ([6], p 20).

As reported by "Forbes" magazine, movies about vampires have gathered about 1.3 billion US dollars in the last 30 years, with an average of 15 million in the first week after a movie's release. This magazine, known for its ratings of the world's wealthiest people, made a similar list of the world's most influential vampires. Among others, it includes E. Cullen from the "Twilight" series, Count Dracula from the movie "Van Helsing", Lestat from "Interview with the Vampire", and another Dracula from the homonymous movie by F. Coppola ([3], p. 5).

Let us trace these connotations by comparing two writings: S. Meyer's "Twilight" tetralogy and "The Vampire Diaries" series of novels by L.J. Smith. Both texts have their cinematic adaptations, in which characters live their own "cinematic" lives that do not always coincide with the original version. However, general tendency of religious myth-making can be traced ([5], p. 200).

We have already mentioned the literary device of inversion – alteration of thoughts and meanings of a character the other way around. Inversion is applied to both inner and outer characteristics of characters – they are young; have no fear of the cross, garlic and Holy water; they can enter a church; they reflect in mirrors, show up in photographs, walk by daylight; they do not sleep in coffins, value comfort and, in most cases, strive to live in harmony with humans. Among a few "old" classical mythemes are: a) "agony" – despite the acquired qualities of strength, immortality, ethereal beauty, omnipotence, etc., supernatural creatures would love to turn back into humans; b) "killability" – they can be killed, though in a specific kind of way: either by putting a wooden stake in the heart or by capitation; c) appearance – fangs, superb strength and speed, color of the eyes, being able to hypnotize the victim or, as

heroine of S. Meyer's book has put it, "dazzling" it. Fog as well as transformation into bats, crows or wolves as attributes of the "evil forces" is viewed either ironically or as a tribute to Gothic culture. Whereas in a "classical" version by B. Stoker Dracula is a demonic hero, and in a modernist book by A. Rice Lestat is a weary hero, postmodernism provides us with an image of a romantic hero. Let us seek evidence within these historical infernal heroes.

"Dracula" has not only laid foundation for further absorption of vampire myths by literature and cinematography, but also brought to light the earlier legends about vampires and used them in a quite effective way" ([8], p. 245). Another researcher of the writings by B. Stoker describes Count Dracula as follows: "in this image B. Stoker brought together a beast, aristocrat, immortality and a creature with hypnotic power over women" ([7], p.197). Now we can point out the basic loci that comprise the Dracula's image. He can influence weather with a particular fondness for thunderstorms; he can read minds, see in the dark but cannot enter a house without an invitation; he neither casts a shadow nor has a reflection; his powers weaken by daylight, and he is pale and hypothermal. Let us provide another quote by the same researcher of the writings by B. Stoker: "Dracula" can be interpreted as a novel about the fight of good and evil, despite the fact that the evil has its attractive sides in it, while the good is too good to be true" ([7], p. 255).

The myth was further developed by A. Rice. "The Vampire Chronicles" is the ambivalent existence of the curse and the blessing at the same time. According to the author herself, the existence of the dark gift involves losing humanity and rigorous search for something to substitute this painful and disorienting loss – power, strength, rivalry, evil deeds, etc. The lead character is a vampire named Lestat. He is self-centered, arrogant and impulsive, though he also suffers and often falls into depression.

1.2. Discussion

What are the components of the infernal world in the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith? We can use the method of V.Y. Propp, who outlined several "functions" serving as permanent elements of a fairytale "setting".

Let us specify the "functions" of romantic religious fantasy in the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith. 1. A hero or a heroine arrives in a small town. 2. A girl meets supernatural creature. 3. Romantic relationship between these characters. 4. Supernatural creature breaks up with the girl and she falls into misery. 5. Relationship continues. 6. The protagonist (lead heroine) turns into a vampire. We can also add the "functions"

offered by S. Meyer – marriage and the birth of a child. 7. Happy end. Both “Twilight” and the nine seasons of “The Vampire Diaries” series had a happy finale.

Therefore, we can see that no matter how unlike the books may seem, they do have much in common in terms of the storyline, which makes their authors the creators of contemporary religious mythology through similar functions. The functions compose mythemes; and mythemes act as carriers of a content-related symbolic message, a sort of symbolic “knots” which tie together the functions and mythological storylines ([4], p. 60).

Let’s look at some of the mythemes. The first one is space. The setting is usually an isolated small town located on the periphery far from metropolitan cities. In the books by S. Meyer, it is the town of Forks in Washington State, USA. S. It’s often raining here, and the sun comes out quite rarely. In the books by L.J. Smith, Mystic Falls (Fell’s Church) is a small town in Virginia founded in 1860. Among the founding families were Forbes, Lockwood, Gilbert, Fell and Salvatore, the representatives of which were keeping diaries writing down the obstacles that they had to face. While in Europe the witches burned on bonfires, here the emphasis was the fight against vampires and werewolves. The founding fathers, who live in the small town to this day, had once concluded a pact to protect citizens from supernatural creatures. Spatiotemporal parameters of the setting cover a school year, during which social space is filled with the multitude of events in the lives of humans and supernatural creatures. Space splits in two: humans live their usual temporal lives while infernal creatures live their timeless ones, until love intervenes and unites characters in its romantic embrace. Supernatural descends upon the protagonist all at once and this is the author’s intention – either to put a human in such conditions, or to return a supernatural character back to a certain mythical spatial point in order for him to meet a human and fall in love with her. The mytheme of “eternal return” interlaces with the narrative thread, thus creating the space where the sacred and the profane are ambivalent.

The second mytheme is “Cinderella”. This is a usual modern girl, a teenager, who lives a fulfilled life – friends, school, first experience of communication with the members of the opposite sex, to which she appears to be very attractive. Her interior life is filled with stress because she is concerned with how things are going in her family. The lead heroines of S. Meyer and L.J. Smith are completely unlike on the outside. Bella Swan (S. Meyer) is clumsy and withdrawn. But she has a rich inner world – no wonder that the author has given her the last name “Swan” pointing out the possibility that the depth of her inner world will yet reveal itself in sacrifice, heroism, being able to fight for her love. Elena Gilbert (L.J. Smith) is aware of her beauty and knows how to

handle her wooers; but she also feels sorrow because she thinks the car accident in which her parents died is her fault and this causes her great distress. However, she is a “Cinderella” too – she is yet to reveal care, commitment and the ability to fight for her love. Elena from “The Vampire Diaries” series is special, sweet, kind, and deeply compassionate – she retains these traits even after losing humanity.

These heroines do not dream of princes and marriage, they want to love and build their relationships here and now. One thing they have in common is that after meeting a “mysterious young man” they try to unravel his secret, watch him closely, gather the facts, and in the end conclude that he is not a human. However, this fact does not change their mind about being together with this creature. Pondering over the romantic relationship with immortal creatures girls doubt themselves – is such love possible? S. Meyer does not give her heroine an alternative choice. Bella Swan decides she wants to be with Edward, therefore she is willing to abandon her human life. L.J. Smith, on the contrary, does give her heroine a choice. She does not want to be like Stefan but the circumstances force her into becoming a vampire.

The third mytheme is trickster. Trickster as a cultural hero is often the object of regard of mythologists and culture studies experts. This cultural hero dwells in between two worlds – he is alive and dead at the same time. In the writings by S. Meyer and L.J. Smith, trickster is more of a male romantic hero. This storyline corresponds with the archetypical desire to experience true love.

The fourth mytheme is the search for meaning. What is it that infernal heroes crave to get at any price? The answer is to be human again and live the lives they once lost. Modern heroes, while suffering, try to retain what is left of their “humanity” by agonizing and protecting their beloved ones. Pondering over the values of human life they tackle vital issues – what was eternal life given them for? Is eternity a blessing or a curse in terms of postmodernism culture? S. Meyer answers this question through the characters of her book. Carlisle Cullen dedicates his life to work being a doctor and helping people. Having just turned into an immortal Edward adopts the role of a lawman – he personally punishes murderers but then realizes this is still not a solution. Having turned into a vampire Bella Cullen wants to spend the eternity loving her husband. Family is all the immortals have. It is about care, communication and memories. Family releases from loneliness.

2. Conclusion

There is no shame in being in love with a vampire. In fictional fantasy worlds, usually created by female authors, one surely can take more liberties than in reality.

Thus, everything demonic in contemporary popular culture becomes far from being evil and repulsive, but attractive and iconic. There's also a more global, anthropological question: what is a man and how to preserve humanity? How much wickedness does it take to become an evil person? Is there turning back? Inversion shows that while on the surface "evil, as intentionally reversed good" is wicked and monstrous, there is still a chance for redemption. Perhaps this is the reason why infernal heroes are more attractive than static mythical archetypes from the medieval tales and iconic horror movies.

Of course, the actors also contribute to this, but the main issue involves profound archetypical images of a cultural hero, mentioned by T.S. Zielinski, in new women's mythology, searching for a new romantic hero for modern women.

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